CHAPTER NINE

CONTACTS AND INFLUENCES IN IONIA IN THE MEDIAN AND EARLY ACHAEMENIAN PERIODS

The god of Time

Under the Saite dynasty, overthrown just before Cambyses' conquest, there was a revival of Egypt's ancient civilization; and this coincided with a time of prosperity for the mainland and Ionian Greeks, who traded extensively throughout the eastern Mediterranean. During the first millennium B.C. a commercial network of Greek cities developed, and the remains of Greek settlements, established in the late seventh century, have been found along the Syrian and Palestinian coasts. There was also a continual migration of Greeks to serve as mercenaries in Near Eastern lands, including Egypt and Babylonia. On a smaller scale there was movement also of Asiatics into Ionian cities; and to judge from their fathers' names several famous Ionian thinkers of the sixth century were of 'barbarian' stock. Thus Byas of Pryene, one of the Seven Sages, had an Asiatic (probably Phrygian) father; Thales of Miletus was of Phoenician ancestry; and the father of Pherecydes of Syros appears to have come from southern Anatolia.¹

This then was a period at which cultural interchanges were to be expected; and it is of considerable interest that it is in the work of Pherecydes—whose floruit is put around 544 B.C.—that the first literary presentation of a primordial divinity of Time is to be found. Pherecydes, a syncretist and 'theologian', was said to have had no teacher, but to have used the 'revelation of Ham' and the 'secret works of the Phoenicians'.² According to his cosmogony,³ there were three divine beings who had always existed: Chronos or Time, Zas, 'He who liveth' (his name for the highest god), and Chthonie, 'She who is beneath the earth'. Zas gave Chthonie earth as a robe of honour, and wedded her as Gê; but Chronos, remaining alone without consort, produced from his own seed fire, wind and water. He was opposed by Ophioneus 'the Snaky One', who had been 'born' (of unknown parents), and who with his armies fought Chronos for possession of heaven. Ophioneus was de-

¹ See M. L. West, Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient, 3, 213-4.
² Ibid., 3.
³ See ibid., 9 ff.
feated and thrust down into the ocean; and thereafter Chronos reigned supreme, and 'wore a crown like a victorious athlete'. Phercecydes was further remembered as the first author who taught that the human soul ... passed from body to body'; but his beliefs concerning the hereafter and the ultimate fate of souls remain obscure.

Babylonian elements have been seen in his teaching about the serpent-god who now inhabits the ocean, and who, though he once fought with Chronos, is not a principle of evil, nor any longer an active force; but the doctrine of the widest interest and significance in Phercecydes' system is undoubtedly that concerning Chronos himself, 'the god Time who always existed, who began everything by generating progeny from his own seed, and who remains powerful in the world of the present day. Here ... is something entirely without precedents in earlier Greek accounts of the origins of things'. Indeed the divinization of an abstract concept of Time is remarkable anywhere in the general religious history of the world.

A possible remote origin for such a concept has been traced in Egyptian beliefs concerning the sun-god Rē, who in the Book of the Dead, for example, is made to declare: 'I am the oldest of the Primeval Ones, my soul is the soul of the eternal gods; my embodiment is Eternity, my form is Everlasting, the lord of years, the ruler of eternity'. Rē was moreover said to have created other gods by an act of self-directed fellatio. We have seen how his symbol of the winged disk made its way throughout the Near East in the second millennium B.C.; and some of the myths and beliefs concerning the Egyptian sun-god may have travelled with it. The 'Sun of Eternity', Shamash ʾōläm, appears in a Phoenician inscription of the ninth or eighth century; and centuries later Eudemus of Rhodes 'reported of the chronology of the Sidonians that they put Chronos, Pothos and Omichle at the beginning of things'.

---

4 Ibid., 23.
5 Ibid., 25. W. Jaeger, The theology of the early Greek philosophers, 84, was evidently right in saying that 'the problem of how and where the doctrine of metempsychosis arose [is] insoluble because nearly all the relevant traditional material has been lost'.
6 West, op. cit., 40.
7 Ibid., 28. Cf. Duchesne-Guillemin, Western Response, 79.
8 This fact in itself created doubt about Nyberg's theory (Rel. 104-5, 280-9) that Zurvan, 'Time', was a primitive god of the western Iranians. This theory was, however, adopted by Widengren and by Wikander (who made Zurvan the mythological father of the Indo-Iranian Vayu). It was also followed by Zaehner in his Zurvan, but abandoned by him in his subsequent book, Dawn and Twilight.
9 See West, op. cit., 35-6 with references.
10 See ibid.
11 Above, pp. 37-8, 96.
12 See West, op. cit., 36.
13 Ibid., 48.